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How do mid-life women integrate their faith into the transition of children leaving home?

by

Rose-Aline Begalke

A Thesis submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the Degree of Master of Nursing

Faculty of Nursing

Edmonton, Alberta

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Rose-Aline Begalke

9910 81 Avenue,
Grande Prairie, AB. T8V 3T2

Jan 4, 1999

UNIVERSITY OF ALBERTA

FACULTY OF GRADUATE STUDIES AND RESEARCH

The undersigned certify that they have read, and recommended to the Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research for acceptance, a thesis entitled "How do mid-life women integrate their faith into the transition of children leaving home?" submitted by Rose-Aline Begalke in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Nursing.

Joanne K. Olson

Dr. J. Olson, Supervisor

Douglass

Dr. L. Douglass

Dianne K Kieren

Dr. D. Kieren

Date Dec 21, 1998

Dedication

This thesis is dedicated to all my "sisters" who have made it safely through not one, but several transitions, sometimes simultaneously. Not only have they made it through, but they have come through with flying colours. We all live to tell our stories so that our "little sisters" may gain some insight, wisdom and hope as they progress through their transitions.

Abstract

This study investigated women's mid-life transition as children leave home and how women integrate their faith into that transition. The women in this study were all actively involved in the congregation of which they are members. They volunteered for the study and were aware of the study's purpose, so it can be assumed that they are women of faith. They testified to the role their faith played in the transition to the empty nest.

This is a qualitative study which used open ended questions in the interview process. Participants were encouraged to tell their stories in hour-long interviews that were recorded and later transcribed for analysis. Their descriptions were compared, contrasted and summarized under three headings: physical, emotional and spiritual. The stories were as unique as the women themselves but the faith that was part of each life was uniquely woven into each story. The integration of this faith produced an "integrative energy" which was explained in their descriptions of how they were now more able to trust - to "let go and let God". It is the "how" of this integration that is being explored and described in this study.

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I wish to acknowledge the kind and efficient supervision of my research project by Dr. Joanne Olson at the University of Alberta, as well as the other two members of my committee, Dr. Lillian Douglass and Dr. Dianne Kieren. Thank you for reading, advising and encouraging. Thanks also to Dr. Jan Morse for sharing her knowledge regarding data analysis, both in person, in the Qualitative Research Center, and by means of her books. Thank you also to Mr. Ted Wood from Grande Prairie Regional College Media Services Department for his computer design of my model.

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Chapter I

Introduction

The transitions of life have been of interest to the researcher for some time. I assumed that the transition to being a wife and then a mother was the most dramatic and traumatic change any woman would ever face. However, as I grew older and wiser, I realized that the major transitions were yet to come. The transitions in mid-life and old age were brought to my attention by the departure of my own children and through my parish nursing practice. The transitions to ailing health, to caring for a spouse who is ailing, and the transition to the death of a spouse have been brought to my attention during my parish nursing practice. For this study, I have focussed on the transition associated with children leaving home, partly because this is the one that is closest to my experience and interest.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to explore and describe the part played by faith in one mid-life transition, that is the transition to an empty nest. Mid-life, usually referring to the years 45-60, is a time of many transitions and has been determined to be very important in the psychological development of women. The purpose of this study was to explore and describe how women in mid-life years integrate faith into the transition of children leaving home.

Some women in the literature speak of their mid-life transition as a time of great spiritual growth, almost a metamorphosis (Dale, 1970; McClelland, 1997; McCole, 1995). The studies by Colston (1994) and Ross (1995) indicate that a high level of spiritual well-being positively affects aging and healing, so one could expect a positive effect on other transitions as well. On the other hand, perhaps the successful transition to the empty nest has a positive effect on ones spirituality? The data collection and analysis will give some information as to the interrelatedness of spiritual growth and the mid-life transition of children leaving home.

The findings will be useful to nurses, clergy, and other health care professionals, as they seek to promote health and well-being for women in their middle years. This information will also be of interest to women in their middle years.

The study investigated the role of faith in the transition to an empty nest for seven women from a parish in Alberta. The literature indicates that this transition can be problematic, however, it often results in a more positive outlook, improved marital satisfaction, and increased self-esteem. There is some literature dealing with the spirituality of women's mid-life (Dale, 1970; McClelland, 1997; McClure, 1991), but none which looks at the part played by faith in this transition. It is this aspect of the transition that has been pursued in this study.

Definition of Terms

Empty nest refers to a home that has contained a family of one or more children, who now have left home. Barber's (1989) definition of the term "empty nest" refers to the years a couple spend together between the launching of their last child and the death of one of the spouses.

Faith is defined as reliance or trust in a person or thing, a belief in religious doctrine or a system of religious belief. For this study, faith refers to a belief in God and adherence to Lutheran doctrine.

Mid-life for the purposes of this study, refers to the period of life between ages 45 and 60.

Mid-life transition refers to the many changes that occur during mid-life that can cause stress, crisis or growth in a woman's life. The phenomena most commonly mentioned in the literature are menopause, aging and death of parents, divorce, career change and children leaving home. This study will concentrate on the latter aspect of mid-life transition. Barber's (1989) definition of the empty nest as "beginning when the first child is launched from the home and ending when the last child departs" (p. 15), will be employed. The transition referred to in this study begins when the last child leaves and the couple find themselves alone again, as they were in early marriage.

Spiritual well-being can be defined in many ways. For this study, the basic definition will be an awareness of belonging to God and the sense of meaning derived from that source. Ellison (1983) defines spiritual well-being as,

"shalom -the integral experience of a person who is functioning as God intended, harmoniously at peace within and without" (p.36). Later, spiritual well-being was described as "a sense of satisfaction with life or purpose in life" (Ellison & Paloutzian, 1991, p.1). Dudley and Cruise (1990) describe spirituality as "a religion that is a controlling force in life" (p. 97).

Spirituality is about relationships with oneself, with others and with one's Higher Power, according to Brown (1990). It can also be defined as a "unifying force, permeating all of life, and manifested through one's being, knowing, and doing" (Burkhardt, 1994, p. 12), or as "an evolving consciousness of God (Dobbie, 1991, p. 827) or "integrative energy" (Ross, 1995 p. 809).

Successful transition in this paper will refer to a positive outcome or sense of well-being, during or after the transition. This will be denoted by the positive comments made by the women during interviews.

Transition is defined in the Oxford American Dictionary as "the process of changing from one state or style to another" (1986, p. 980). Transitions are a part of life and may be the cause of both stress and growth (French, 1992).

In modern times, we hear the term "in transition" used. At no other time in life is this more a part of life than in mid-life.

Integration refers to spiritual energy (Goddard, 1995) being an integral part of the transition.

Overview of the Study

In this qualitative study, interviews were used to gather data about the integration of faith into the mid-life transition of children leaving home. Seven women from one faith community were interviewed, using an interview question guide with open-ended questions to encourage the women to "tell their story". Women who participated in the study have met the following criteria:

a) 45-60 years of age,

b) married,

c) have raised one or more children, and

d) children have all left home.

Each participant was interviewed once and some were interviewed twice. The first interview lasted about one hour, and the second, a shorter phone interview, was for clarification. All interviews were recorded on audiotape.

Audiotapes were then transcribed verbatim using a word processor. Demographic data about the participants was also collected. Field notes and a personal research journal were maintained by the researcher.

The researcher analyzed the data, guided by her faculty supervisor, examining all data sources (transcripts, demographic information, researcher diary, and field notes). Transcripts were searched carefully for categories reflecting patterns and themes and for relationships among the categories. Time frames for sampling, data collection, and analysis overlapped so that findings from the analysis could guide the collection of further information. Measures were carried out to ensure rigour and ethical conduct in the research process.

Usefulness of the Study

The results of this study will add to knowledge about women in mid-life, especially regarding the ways in which their faith is integrated into this transition. Results will be disseminated in written form by way of this thesis and in oral and poster presentations at professional conferences. Information gained from the study will be useful for nurses

as they work with women in their mid-life years as well as in assisting women to understand this transition in their own and other family member's lives.

Parish nurses will find the results especially helpful in assisting women in their practice to integrate faith into this and other transitions of their lives. Nurses in general will find the information useful in their own lives and in working with mid-life women in their practices. Anyone interested and concerned about spirituality and spiritual growth, such as pastors, chaplains, spiritual directors and lay church leaders will find this information useful in guiding and understanding the process in this life stage.

CHAPTER II

Literature Review

Before undertaking this study, a comprehensive literature review was done. Literature from the 1980's and 1990's was reviewed as well as some articles from between 1950 and 1980. The literature revealed a consistent trend away from a somewhat negative view of the empty nest in the earlier literature to a much more positive view in the later literature.

Literature was reviewed in the following areas: 1) women in mid-life; 2) "empty nest" literature; 3) faith and spiritual well-being in women, and 4) spiritual well-being and mid-life issues. Before attempting an in-depth study of one aspect of mid-life, it is important to have an overview of recent literature and research related to mid-life issues. Since this study investigated integration of faith into the specific transition of empty nest, the researcher reviewed literature on the empty nest and on faith issues in women generally as well as faith issues for the mid-life woman.

Women in Mid-life

The literature reveals a paucity of mid-life research. Musgrave and Menell (1980) stated "What it is like to live through the middle years is one of the best kept secrets in our society, and perhaps in human history generally" (p.7). With the publication of Gail Sheehy's books, "Passages"(1976), "Silent Passage"(1992), and "New Passages "(1995), it became more popular to speak about middle-age. Sheehy (1995) said that "some people shrink from any suggestion that mid-life is upon them" (p.115). Her interviews of many middle-aged individuals have done much to lift the silence that formerly surrounded this age group. Recently, with the impending influx of the "baby boomers" into middle age, we have begun to hear and read much about this period in life. Along with this, has come a flood of research into various issues of mid-life such as menopause and the empty nest syndrome, referred to by Sheehy (1992)

Few studies prior to 1985 described mid-life. Nolan (1986) stated "Middle-age as a topic for research was largely ignored because there was a prevailing view that nothing of interest took place during this period of development" (p. 151). Also, any research focussing on this

age group, according to Nolan, was done with males. Thus, the lack of a female developmental model led to negative stereotypes regarding the middle-aged woman. One mid-life study (Thomas, 1988) set out to investigate the relationships among factors such as psychological well-being, perceived creativity/talent, depression, and peri-menopausal symptoms experienced by women during mid-life. A significant negative relationship was found between 1) talent perception, 2) depression, and 3)total symptoms of menopause. A significant inverse relationship was found between psychological well-being and total peri-menopausal symptoms. Another study by Duffy (1988), looked at health locus of control, self-esteem, and health status for their impact on health-promoting activities. Findings indicated that these three factors correlated positively with health promotion in mid-life women. These were the earliest studies found dealing with mid-life and it is obvious that psychological well-being and menopause were the main focus.

Several articles emerged in the early 1990's related to general health, fitness, and well-being in mid-life. A study by Gillis and Perry (1991) framed research questions within Pender's Health Promotion Model. The results of the study

suggested that physical activity can contribute significantly to overall well-being and quality of life for mid-life women. Gillis and Perry conclude their study by stating "most published research on factors influencing exercise adherence are based on traditional male models. There remains a need to develop new and different models for study based on the female experience"(p. 309).

Rosenthal (1995) described her own experience of menopause with its variations in energy and productivity, as similar to the "waiting" of the Advent season of the church. "When my agent asked in November what delivery date he should give publishers for my book-in-progress, I sighed: 'Two years after menopause'" (p. 22). French's (1992) research concluded that "women in this research sample experienced a sense of relief and energy after menopause, were satisfied with their lives after their children left home, and showed that life satisfaction was positively correlated with individuation" (p.118).

Dennerstein, Smith, and Morse's (1994) study assessed well-being during mid-life. They concluded that menopausal status did not significantly affect well-being. Well-being was found to be significantly related to current health

status, interpersonal stress, and attitudes to aging and to menopause. More recently, Woods and Mitchell (1996), looked at patterns of depressed mood in mid-life women. They assert that assumptions have been made in the past about depression in the mid-life woman, relating it to hormonal changes. The purpose of their study was to "differentiate women who experience depressed mood during mid-life with respect to changes related to the menopause. These changes included bleeding patterns and vasomotor symptoms and other factors unrelated to menopause"(p. 111). Two studies (Dennerstein, Smith & Morse, 1994; Woods & Mitchell, 1996), found that moods changed and that there were other indicators of psychological well-being change during menopause. However there were many additional factors that had an influence on psychological well-being. These included social context, estrogen levels, current health status, interpersonal stress, and attitudes to aging, menopause, and culture.

Though literature about mid-life has increased in recent years, there remains much confusion. Most often midlife for women is equated with menopause and carries a negative connotation. It is encouraging that the more recent studies are looking at the complexities of midlife and that

such studies are becoming more common and diverse.

"Empty Nest" Literature

The "empty nest" has become a popular topic for researchers and writers. It refers to a home which has been the "nest" for one or more children who are now grown up and no longer live in the parental home. The "empty nest" is found most often in the psychology literature with a focus on the psychological repercussions for parents, (Deutscher, 1964; Krystal & Chiriboga, 1978; Raup & Myers, 1989; Rogers, 1973). Oliver, (1988) stated that the transition from active mothering to continuing motherhood, such as occurs at the empty nest stage, is "fraught with maladaptive potential" (p.105). Oliver's recommendation was rational-emotive therapy for these women, to help them change their maladaptive cognitions to rational adaptive ones when their active mothering role ends.

Musgrave and Menell (1980), and Oliver (1988) wrote about the secrecy of the middle years. Since then, much more has been written on the empty nest and other transitions of mid-life. Bell and Eisenberg (1985) concluded that life satisfaction of childless couples does not differ from that

of empty-nest individuals except with regard to issues relating to children. According to Nolan(1986), the departure of children from the home or the empty nest syndrome, has been thought to present a woman with an excess of free time and a loss of a sense of purpose. Much of the literature assumes that the empty nest has some impact on mothers and fathers. Titles such as "Empty-nest syndrome: Possibility or despair" (Tallmer, 1989) and "The empty nest syndrome: Myth or reality?" (Raup & Myers, 1989) suggests a hesitation to name the syndrome and possible confusion as to its effects. Tallmer (1989) described the phenomenon of the empty nest as a syndrome that must be viewed in terms of general adult development and the meaning of parenthood--motherhood in particular. She encourages consideration of the positive aspects of the empty nest. Raup and Myers (1989) also referred to this stage as the "post-parental" phase of development. Other family dynamics have a great influence on how women adapt to this developmental stage. They encouraged counsellors to be aware of the impact of "language and media, the possibility of severe reactions, factors affecting adjustment, and the effect of this transition on the family life cycle" (p.181).

The earlier literature does indicate that the empty nest has a greater effect on mothers than it does on fathers (Deutscher, 1959; Krystal & Chiriboga, 1978; Rogers, 1973). Krystal and Chiriboga's (1978) studied 45 men and women with mean ages of 51.6 for men and 48.4 for women. Their overall conclusion was that there were positive rather than negative reactions to the empty nest. Their group delineations were very confusing as they divided respondents into "full" or "empty" (nest). Some fell into both groups over the period of time the research was conducted so there was overlap in results that could affect the study's internal validity.

Goren's (1983) phenomenological analysis of the empty nest transition revealed that "the experience began with an anticipation that was either negative or positive. There was then surprise when the event inevitably included both aspects" (p. 102).

Gender differences related to this transition have been the subject of two more recent studies (Bell & Eisenberg, 1985; & DeVries, 1990). Bell and Eisenberg found no significant difference in "life-satisfaction" for female and male married adults after children left home. DeVries (1990) examined the impact of a major family transition, the

launching of children, on parents. Results were surprising in that they showed little significant gender differences in the way mothers and fathers handled this transition, with fathers being more negatively affected than mothers. Another surprise was that both appraisal ratings were quite positive, suggesting that the launching phase is not an overwhelming or traumatic experience for mothers or fathers. The marital satisfaction index showed the highest ratings in marital satisfaction for both mothers and fathers in the post-parental period (defined as two or more years after launching the last child).

Gender identity and ego mastery style in pre-and post-empty nest women were the focus of a study by Cooper and Gutmann (1987). Women prior to the empty nest were more likely to give answers which were tabulated as "female gender" answers while post-empty nest women often gave the more assertive or aggressive "male" answers. Part of Cooper and Gutman's theory was that many male behavioral responses are repressed by women during the pre-empty nest period.

White and Edwards (1990) conducted a study to determine the effects of children leaving home on "parental well-being." Interviews were conducted, five years apart, during

and after this transition. Their conclusions were that the "empty nest" was associated with significant improvements in marital happiness for all parents. Life satisfaction improved significantly, however, only if there was frequent contact with grown children. Similar findings by Small (1991) indicated that mothers reported greater personal fulfilment as their children emancipated, contradicting the myth of the "empty nest syndrome." Gonzalas (1990) reported that "the empty nest transition appeared to be a catalyst for shifts or reassessment of identity in some of these mothers" (p. 90).

One should question the change over the past 40 years regarding the empty nest. The more recent studies looked at other factors involved in this transition including career involvement. The change in women's career involvement may account for the more positive adjustments to the empty nest. This could be investigated further.

Faith and Spiritual Well-being in Women

Most authors literature discussed the transition of children leaving home in terms of the psychological and developmental significance with little attention being given

to the impact on the spiritual dimension and the inter-relationship between psychological and the spiritual well-being. Individuation is the primary developmental task for mid-life women according to feminist psychologists, Gilligan (1982), Miller (1986), and Horner (1989) and is very disparate from the developmental tasks for men at this age. Men, according to Gallagher (1993), are involved in readjustment of their life dreams. McClure (1991) believed that "women in our culture tend to evaluate themselves in terms of the timing of family events whereas men use career or biological markers" (p. 4). Cornwall (1989) agrees that not only are developmental tasks different for men and women, but religiosity differs as well. She attempts to pinpoint and label what it is that makes the difference and concludes that "the gender differences may never be understood until the meaning of being female is explored sociologically and psychologically" (p. 136). An attempt to understand the gender differences was made at an interfaith women's conference under the World Council of Churches in 1988. Women there discovered that "there is a common basis of female experience which underlies their whole approach to spirituality"(Webb, 1993).

Cowden (1992) studied the faith development of twenty pre-mid-life women, 30-45 years of age of varying faiths and cultural backgrounds. Her purpose was to examine the moral development theories of Kohlberg (1984) and Gilligan (1982), and the faith development theory of Fowler (1981) to determine their implications for a better understanding of faith development in women. Cowden discovered an underlying ethic of care in women's faith development. Her conclusion is that one must consider insights from Gilligan's theory of moral development to adequately portray the faith development process in women's experience. This could account for the lack of literature on spirituality in women since Gilligan's arguments were not published until 1982.

Dobbie (1991) in her phenomenological study examined the mid-life spiritual experience of 10 women members of the United Church of Canada. Caucasian women, 38-58 years old, who perceived themselves in mid-life transition, shared stories of their spiritual experiences. The women's spiritual experiences were organized within "an evolving consciousness of self and children, and an evolving consciousness of God" (p. 827). There were "trigger events" that emerged in this study, one of which was children

leaving home. Dobbie concluded that further studies are needed with women of other faith traditions and cultural contexts. She suggests studies with women beyond the 40s and 50s to find out how their spiritual and religious beliefs develop. She further suggests that this information needs to be incorporated into the nursing care plans and nursing theories. "Knowledge about women's faith integration during the 'empty nest' stage is a virtual mystery and a necessary segment of knowledge if we are to do holistic nursing with mid-life women" (p. 830).

Dupuy (1989), a feminist scholar began to address the void in the literature regarding women's religious/spiritual experience in their personal lives. Through formal unstructured interviews, researchers asked the question, "In what ways do you find religious/spiritual meaning in your personal lives?" (p. 249). The findings of this qualitative study support recent findings of women's experience of spirituality. Whether involved in organized religion or not, these women described a 'sense' of their religion/spiritual experience as a sense of: "being in relationship, connectedness/connection, oneness, state of being, something greater, levels of realities, love-joy-hope-knowing, life

cycles and life givingness"(Cowden, 1992, p.370).

Crawford (1989) studied the relationship between religion and emotional distress in women. He used the Personal Religiosity Inventory (PRI) to assess religion and the Langner 22-item Screening Scale to assess emotional distress. His conclusions were that women with low degrees of integration of their religious beliefs with their behaviour, affect and cognitions, experienced significantly more emotional distress than women who expressed high degrees of integration.

Burkhardt (1994), a female scholar put forth a view that spirituality in women may be experienced and expressed differently than by men. This grounded theory study involved in-depth interviews with 12 women in Appalachia.

> The results revealed spirituality as a unifying force permeating all of life, and manifested through one's becoming and connecting. Women indicated that spirituality shapes and gives meaning to life, is expressed in one's being, knowing, and doing, and is experienced within caring connections with Self, Others, Nature, and Ultimate other. Spirituality was related to an inner knowing and source of strength

(p.12).

This study contributed much needed knowledge to enhance understanding of the concept of spirituality, especially as it pertains to women. A feminist writer (Hunt, 1995), advocates the forming of groups to help meet women's spiritual needs. Her research showed that women's spiritual needs, in her sample, were not being met in our patriarchal society.

Studies regarding the nature of spirituality in women are few but increasing. It is now recognized that women's spirituality is different from that of men. This finding suggests a need to give women's spirituality, separate attention. Some of these differences are related to connectedness and relationships. Further studies are needed as stated by some of the above authors.

Spiritual Well-being and Mid-life Issues

Willits and Crider (1988) suggested that, for people in the middle years, certain religious attitudes are associated with feelings of enhanced overall well-being. The five attitude items are 1) knowing there is a God, 2) believing that God knows our every thought and movement, 3) believing

that God controls everything that happens everywhere, 4) believing that religious faith is better than logic for solving life's important problems, and 5) believing that people, working and thinking together can build a good society without any divine or supernatural help. Surprising findings were that "church attendance and early religious socialization may be associated with well-being at mid-life" (p. 29). Willits and Crider do admit that many questions remain unanswered and they support continued research to explore the link between religiosity and well-being. Albrecht and Cornwall (1989) found that positive life events produced increases in importance of church life and religious beliefs.

Dobbie (1991) concluded that there was need for more research into women's faith integration during the empty nest transition. McClure (1991), a PhD student at Fuller Theological Seminary also studied this very topic. The developmental study of ten mid-life women suggested that a spiritual crisis of meaning occurs during mid-life along with some profound psychological changes. McClure analyzed respondent stories for central themes and issues. Themes of individuation, or becoming a whole person, were common and

integrating these themes into a new sense of self proved to be a difficult task for the women in her study. She concluded "comparative studies of women between ages 40 & 60 and 60 to 80 would be useful. Religion must be included as an important aspect to mid-life experiences" (p. 298).

Snow (1990) wrote about the "failure at midlife" (p. 11) of whatever means they have used for making sense out of life, especially their belief system or spiritual life. This failure, he claimed is true for both men and women. Snow described their spirituality as a social support and that at midlife, for various reasons, their theology fails. They do not see that who God is and how God acts in the world can help them in understanding themselves and their lives at this stage.

A very relevant piece of literature reviewed was by Colston (1994). He quoted the axiom "keep the faith" as a coping mechanism for surviving the social transitions of life. He cites his own research and others to support the position that the stress of life events is a major influence on the aging process. "The role of religion and faith are found to be critical elements in one's personal adaptation to aging as well as surviving the uncertainty of life

events" (p.75). He discussed social transitions of aging, beginning with retirement and does not include the "empty nest." One cannot assume that faith would have the same effect on coping in both early and late transitions. Further research needs to be done to determine this.

McCole (1995) spoke of midlife in Jungian terms, as an emerging of the unconscious and writes "the journey from bondage to freedom is, I believe, the journey of mid-life" (p. 132). She likened it to the biblical account of the Emmaus road experience and encouraged those in midlife to recognize the Christ who is walking with us and "fix our eyes on our true selves reflected in the face of the crucified Christ" (p. 138).

Another article of interest (Goddard, 1995) described spirituality as "a universal phenomenon, yet conceptual confusion, ambiguity and scientific scepticism have prevented adequate investigation into its potential healing effects". She proposes "A philosophical definition of spirituality as integrative energy" (p. 808). It is this definition of spirituality or spiritual well-being as "integrative energy" that I will attempt to examine in this research study. The relatedness of spiritual growth and mid-

life was emphasized by Dale (1970) "In mid-life we become aware of the cross's relevance to human experience; it is the shadow we cast on the ground when we open our arms to life" (p. 62). The latest article reviewed was one by McClelland (1997). The title alone gave a good idea of her concept of mid-life and spirituality. She stated "As a result of the mid-life transition we gain a unique ability to worship God with our whole selves" (p.12)

With research growing in the area of mid-life, spirituality, and spiritual well-being, it is gratifying to see the beginning of integration between these factors. Mid-life transitions have been shown by a few authors to be an important catalyst in spiritual development in women. Conversely, spiritual well-being has been shown to be a factor in successful transition in the middle years. This has been attested to by the above researchers as well as by those like Dale (1970) and McClelland (1997), who have related their own experiences in mid-life.

Summary of Literature Review

The literature review indicates that mid-life persons and especially women, are faced with several developmental

transitions. The most frequently mentioned transition is the "empty nest". Psychology looks at the emotional upheaval and how this transition affects men and women emotionally and how it affects their relationship. Feminist literature looks at the opportunities and potentials for women through this transition. Religious literature similarly looks at the potential for spiritual growth in mid-life but none found, looked specifically at spiritual growth and faith in the transition to the empty nest. Nursing literature had very little to say about the empty nest and nothing to say about the role of faith during that transition. While nursing claims to be holistic, promoting health of body, mind and spirit at all developmental stages, there is a gap in the literature of the spiritual health dimension of mid-life women during this empty nest transition

Chapter III

Methodology

Introduction

A qualitative, exploratory, descriptive research method was used to study how mid-life women integrate their faith into the transition of children leaving home. The qualitative method is relevant for this research question because little is known about the phenomenon (Field & Morse, 1995). Sample selection, data collection and analysis are described in detail below.

As a descriptive study, it included elaboration of the context, retrospective happenings, and prospective plans which pertain to this mid-life transition. Subjects told their story, some past events as well as future and elaborated on their faith in this context. As an exploratory study, it investigated the meaning of mid-life events and spiritual well-being for seven mid-life women at a particular point in their lives. Descriptive studies examine the characteristics of a specific single population, mid-life women in one faith community in this case (Brink & Wood, 1988).

Data Collection Tools

Tools for data collection, a questionnaire and interview guide are included in Appendices B and C. The investigator developed the questionnaire as well as the interview guide.

The interview questions were derived from the research question and began with a broad focus. As the research progressed, emerging data supplied direction for further questions which then were added to the interviews. Each interview was tape recorded and brief notes regarding observations of non-verbal language were made by the interviewer.

Recruitment and Sample

Initially, an advertisement was placed in the monthly church paper asking for volunteers (Appendix A). Seven married women, 45-60 years of age, volunteered to participate in the study. Since they volunteered in response to the ad in the church paper, no further solicitation was necessary.

They were members of a Lutheran congregation in an Alberta town of 30,000 people. All of the women had raised

children who now lived out of their parental home. The parish has a population of 717 baptized members, including infants and children, and 434 confirmed members (14 years and over). According to 1996 church records, over half of the confirmed members are women and of those, approximately 30 are in the age category delineated by this study. The younger members of this congregation tend to have university education while older members characteristically do not. This upper middle class congregation was formed in 1949. The present church building was erected in 1957. There are normally two ministers employed by this congregation as well as two other clerical and custodial staff. The primary investigator for this study has been a member of this congregation for 16 years and has served part time as the congregational parish nurse since August 1, 1997.

The sample was from this parish only, to eliminate variability in faith beliefs and religious practices. The age category limits served as a means to ensure that the women were truly mid-life and the limits of children having left home ensured that they had made at least this one transition in mid-life.

Pilot Testing

The interview guide was piloted with a friend, who is not a member of this parish, and who consented to pretest the interview questions. The tape from this pilot interview was transcribed and advice sought from an expert in interviewing and communications regarding the adequacy of interviewing skills. Feedback from the pilot test participant indicated that the participant may be more comfortable if she knew all the questions before beginning the interview. Keeping this in mind, the researcher made this an option for the participants. However, only one of the participants chose to hear all the questions before beginning the interview.

Procedures

Each subject individually received detailed information about the study before the consent form was signed. The initial interview times varied from 45 minutes to one hour. The questions were asked, one at a time, with no particular time limit on each one. When the participant seemed ready, the interviewer would move on to the next question. The question at the end "Is there anything else that you would

like to tell me about this period in your life?" allowed for the participant to add anything she may have missed. She was also invited to call if something came to her awareness later.

Ethical Considerations

The rights of the subjects in this study were protected in several ways.

1. Their right to confidentiality was protected by not naming any participant in the data and not linking any data with anyone participating. Code names were used and data was kept locked during the research process. The parish and the city have not been identified in the final report.

2. The right to anonymity was protected by reporting the data in a composite way, rather than individual findings. Overall results are descriptions given by the women of this parish regarding spiritual well-being during and after the mid-life transition of children leaving home. It is difficult, within the report, to identify any one member of the group of women interviewed.

3. Voluntary participation was stressed and no one was coerced to participate in the study. Participants were told

they could withdraw at any time.

4. A consent form (see Appendix D) was signed by each participant, after the plan for data collection and reporting had been explained to her.

5. The benefits of the study were explained to each participant. The potential value of this study for all participants is a better understanding of the part that their faith played in their mid-life transition.

6. Non maleficence was also explained to the participant. There were few risks inherent in this research but if children leaving home has been very traumatic for a woman, the discussion of that event could have caused emotional upset. If this had occurred, sources of help would have been suggested and referral made if necessary.

Data Collection

This study utilized a combination of interviews and a demographic questionnaire. The data were collected by using open-ended questions which gave the respondent an opportunity to express her own feelings or ask for clarification. According to Brink & Wood, (1989) open-ended, broad questions encourage subjects to tell their stories.

The order of questions was flexible and the researcher could return to previous questions for clarification if needed. A face-to-face interview allowed for observation of body language, facial expressions and the congruity of body language with the subject's answers to the questions. The questionnaire was used to obtain demographic data only.

In this qualitative study, the data of most importance to the researcher were obtained by interview. The interview questions were reviewed by classmates in a qualitative research class to ensure clarity and face validity. If the questions did not facilitate responses due to lack of clarity, changes were made to the wording. Questions inquired about changes in faith during the transition but were worded so they did not suggest changes toward stronger or weaker faith.

Methodological Rigour: Reliability and validity

Qualitative research is particularly useful when describing a phenomenon from the *emic* perspective according to Morse & Field (1995). This is the perspective of the participant, from their viewpoint. No theories are developed in advance and none evolve from the data collection process.

Four general criteria are often used for the evaluation of qualitative research (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The *Truth Value or Credibility* is accomplished by reporting the perspectives of the informants clearly, as there are multiple realities. This was accomplished in this study by quoting their exact words in the analysis portion of the study. *Applicability* is the criterion used to determine whether the findings can be applied to other contexts or with other groups (p.143). It is not the purpose of this study, nor of any qualitative research to generalize to other groups. *Consistency* is used to evaluate trustworthiness. Qualitative research emphasizes the uniqueness of each situation or interview, so variation in experience is to be expected. Each interview in this study is unique and variable from the others in many respects. *Neutrality or Confirmability* refers to the freedom from bias in the research process. This can be improved in qualitative research by longer contacts and periods of observation with the participants. "Researchers also try to identify their own biases through the use of memos and through consultation with other researchers" (Morse & Field, 1995, p.144). I knew each of these women from contacts in the parish and

considered them women of faith. This observation, made *before* the research began may have produced bias toward recognizing the positive effects of their faith in this transition. In spite of knowing them all and one of them very well, the content of the interviews were new to me. "I was amazed at how many things I didn't know about someone I thought I knew so well." (Researcher's journal, May 4, 1998)

The researcher in this study was aware of Lincoln and Guba's (1985) criteria and made efforts to listen actively. "I find these stories so intriguing, I almost forget to ask the next question!" (Researcher's journal, Feb. 25, 1998). The perspectives were recorded clearly, by quoting some answers directly rather than paraphrasing them, and the researcher attempted to analyze them without bias. After drawing some conclusions, the question was asked "Could there be an alternative explanation for the relationships observed? Discussions with the research supervisor, colleagues and fellow students assisted in this process. The findings were subsequently discussed with three of the participants, including the model which emerged. They concurred that this analysis fit the description of the integration of faith into the empty nest transition for

them.

Data Analysis

The questionnaire was used to obtain demographic data and to ensure that the subject fit the criteria. Subject's ages ranged from forty-seven to fifty-eight years (mean=53 years). The number of children ranged from one to four (mean=2.4 children) and children's ages ranged from nineteen to thirty-seven (mean 32 years). Years married ranged from twenty to thirty-eight (mean 32 years) and the average age of husbands was fifty-three years.

The interview tapes were transcribed verbatim. The transcripts were repeatedly read and the tapes listened to for accuracy and general content themes. Transcripts were corrected and copied on to paper of seven different colours. Files were created for each question. The transcribed responses were cut and filed into these seven files and read again to compare answers on each question. This, according to Morse is the "comprehending" stage (Morse & Field, 1995, p. 126). On subsequent readings, categories of data began to be formed and descriptive summaries of those categories were coded in the margins of the transcript. Data from each interview were constantly compared to the first interview

and the other interviews, to note similarities, differences and any recurrent themes.

Most of these codes were *descriptive*, requiring little interpretation. Some were more *interpretive* and others could be termed *pattern* codes which are more inferential and explanatory (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Morse would refer to this as the "synthesizing" stage (Morse & Field, 1995, p.127). Categories of these similarities and differences were sorted, recorded and analyzed. Morse refers to this as the analysis of categories (p.135).

The data were then placed in tables using these categories, and others that arose, as headings. The investigator kept track of the process of arriving at labels, as well as, a series of field notes as she labelled and categorized data. Associations between the characteristics described by the sample and data categories were analyzed. A data filing system was developed to allow storage of the data in a retrievable manner. The tapes and transcriptions were reviewed again for faith content and a display or map constructed, illustrating linkages, contrasts and comparisons of data. The investigator went back to the interviewee, in some cases, for a second interview to fill

in areas not clear, and obtain any new information. Constant comparison between subsequent interviews and the first, was done and when obvious differences occurred, the investigator went back again to the first interviewee to clarify. This constituted the "interparticipant" part of the analysis (Morse & Field, 1995, p. 128). Reliability of the content analysis was assessed by a second trained person analyzing a sample of the data and placing it in categories. The data were then examined for examples regarding the integration of faith by mid-life women.

Summary of Methods

How integration of faith occurs in the specific transition of children leaving home was the focus of this study. Though there have been studies "around" this topic, none have resulted in answers to this specific question in this way. The researcher sought answers from a small number of women primarily by in-depth interviews, soliciting their "stories". These stories were then analyzed for answers to the question, "How do mid-life women integrate their faith into the transition of children leaving home?"

Their answers were then grouped into three main categories:

Physical, emotional and spiritual and their associated subcategories respectively.

Chapter IV

Presentation of Findings

Interparticipant Analysis

Initial analysis of the data was done by comparing the answers each participant gave to each question. See Appendix F for details. This was a fascinating process in itself as answers were varied. This initial analysis led to the identification of several categories and sub-categories for further analysis.

Analysis by Categories

The data seemed to fall naturally into three major categories - physical, emotional and spiritual. The first question was asked emphasizing the three categories so this likely contributed to this mindset by the participants. There was much more data collected regarding the spiritual aspects than the other two categories, while the data contained very little regarding the physical aspect of mid-life. These three categories were further sorted into sub-categories as follows:

Physical

Awareness

Health was described as something you do not take for granted anymore. "You begin to realize that you are not invincible." Participants described an increased awareness of their bodies. Whereas before, they would scarcely notice pain, now they became more aware that this should be noted and that it could have permanent effects. The possibility of the "big C" (Cancer) is there now whereas that possibility did not occur to them before. Some became aware of weight problems that did not exist before and one had a strong desire to quit smoking now, though she has smoked for many years. Another was very aware that her body would not allow the same level of sports competition as she had been used to. The participants discussed this new body awareness freely.

Illness

Three of the participants had experienced or were experiencing illness in their mid-life. For two of the women, the illness occurred at the time when their children were leaving. For another, the illness was being experienced

now, causing pain and uncertainty about her future. This was producing some stress in her life. Those who experienced illness while the children were departing, had been very resourceful in finding solutions to their health problems. Health promotion activities, according to Duffy (1988), are most successful when there is healthy self-esteem and women feel they have the locus of control in determining their health status. There was some evidence of loss of control in those women who were experiencing an ongoing illness or pain.

Decrease in Ability

This aspect of physical health was referred to by one informant who had been a very active participant in competitive sports. This did not produce a lot of frustration, but rather a resignation that she could not play as competitively as before. She saw "that was not really a problem." There was a philosophical approach to this problem such as "if that's what is going to happen, that is the way that it will go." Another participant who had always had an active life, participating in swimming and walking, was prevented from doing these things now by

arthritic discomfort.

Menopause

There were not as many menopausal symptoms spoken about as the researcher expected. Perhaps this could be attributed to the average age of the participants, which was fifty-three. Perhaps some had made it through this stage and resolved many of the physical problems often associated with it. Hormone replacement therapy seemed to be the answer for the participant who was having hot flashes, bouts of excessive perspiration, and sleep disturbances. However, she had a slight stroke and had to stop the hormone therapy. She was now attempting to deal with it in other ways, such as Reflexology, and was experiencing some relief with that.

Emotional

Change

All of the participants alluded to change during mid-life. However, only one referred to the usual mid-life changes in job or career. She had decided, at one point in her mid-life, that she needed to "do something different with my life." She then made a decision about her career

which was good for her but also the best for her family.

The focus was primarily on the changes in family life, due in part to the nature of the questions in this study. "Well it has been quite a change -- our kids leaving home. All of a sudden it was just the two of us at home. It was "like starting a new life again" was one response. Another stated "when the children are gone you think 'where else can I be of service? ' And that involves a change of focus - first from marriage to children, then to career, then to retirement." The changes produce some role confusion as well. "You still love them and you want to be their mother but you only want to be their mother sometimes. And sometimes you're not their mother because they don't listen to you anymore." Some felt there was a gender difference in adjusting to change: "And it takes a while to adjust. Like a father goes to work and does his thing and it doesn't affect him as much, but a mother is home so the change is greater." This response was from a participant who did not work outside the home.

Regrets

Some of the participants voiced regrets or feelings of

guilt as their child/children left home. The regret usually was related to something they had neglected to do with their children or neglected to teach them. Often time was a factor cited in failing to act. "I really feel bad about those years where I didn't get them to Sunday School and confirmation - but they don't blame us for that." Another stated,

> The only regret I have is that I didn't get into it sooner in my life to get him (son) into it too . . . (referring to church life). I remember talking to him when he was little, about God and had him say his prayers and things like that but it was never reinforced by going to church. We never attended church. It was just the way it was.

There were no references in the literature that the researcher reviewed, regarding guilt or regret on the part of either parent, although parent/child conflict during this period has received some attention (DeVries, 1990).

Rewards

An ongoing relationship with children after they have left home is important. The rewards of good communication

throughout their growing years were mentioned--- the joys of having married children still coming to the parents for advice. On the other hand, having a child leave home when communication was not good was difficult, as a participant put it, "Yeah, that was kind of traumatic - here we were, we could not be in the same room other than screaming at each other--it was just really counterproductive."

Grandparenting was quoted as a major reward of this age group. Just over half of the participants have grandchildren and they were more than enthusiastic in sharing their pleasure in grandparenting. "Grandkids are way better than kids," was one comment. Other rewards were "seeing children progress and seeing their success," or as another participant put it "we were really impressed with his confidence and doing those things and taking care of things." Another mentioned being excited for him as he moved on to independence.

There were other rewards of this stage listed, such as more money, more time, more opportunities and the freedom to "work by choice". There is now time to do "what I like to do, things that make me happy, and more time together with my husband." Another stated simply "I found this a rewarding

time, not a frustrating time in my life." Another said "Now I'm getting back my own life."

Distance

The distance that a child moves away, when he or she leaves home makes a difference in the experience of the parents. One statement was "Last year he moved to _____, thinking that things were greener on the other side and that kind of bothered me, knowing that I could not see him quite as easily." Conversely when a child moved within the same community, the comment was "He always popped in now and then, still does and we still spend time together. It wasn't a very hard time for me because _____ [husband] and I are so close to him." Another participant stated "I missed them but I didn't really miss them, they really weren't anywhere. You know they didn't really go away, away."

On the other hand, if the distance was great, the emotions were greater.

> He went to ____. He was there for a short while and he was job hunting there. So that is not too far away. Then he moved to _____ and that's where he still is. It was hard. I cried, even when I knew he was going to go.

I knew that was it - that he wouldn't be there anymore . . . as long as he doesn't move too far away, but he says he wants to go overseas. He says there is not much distance because he can get home in one day. But it IS distance.

Another participant stated "I wish I could be closer. I would like to be able to help a little more and have the close friendship that we had."

Mourning

All participants in one way or another expressed a mourning that was part of the children leaving. How severe or long lasting the mourning was dependant on several factors. One such factor was permanence of the move.

But the last time, when he left for ____, then it really hit me that he wouldn't be back. That was the hardest part. That was my mourning period. And I guess I still experience it from time to time, because I miss him.

Readiness to move out was another factor.

That was our oldest one and I didn't feel that he was ready to leave home. I remember the day that he left I

was at the front window . . . he was only going across town, it's not like he was leaving, leaving. I stood at the window and I was waving to him. I don't think I was crying but I'm sure that I was choked up a little."

The environment into which the child moved was another important factor.

There was not a welcoming committee, there was nobody. We were just devastated and disappointed. We hated leaving him there, so when we got back home, I spent a whole day crying and several days off and on after that . . . It was very difficult. I guess that is part of it. Knowing that your child has someone where they are going.

While the above women spoke of mourning, it was a temporary, non-pathological mourning. It did not appear that the "rational-emotive" therapy that Oliver (1988), recommends, was warranted.

Spiritual

Time for Reflection

Nearly all the participants spoke of growth in their spiritual lives during mid-life. One of the factors that

they attributed this to was the fact that they now had more time--for themselves, their husbands, prayer, reading and meditation. As one put it:

> Spiritually, I guess with the kids gone, it has given me a little more time for God and to reflect on where God fits into my life. So, I guess I was open to more studies or more just talking with God. I guess then I have had time to do things as far as the church goes.

Another states "We have spent more time in devotions ourselves, which in our busy lives we just did, off and on prior to that, rather than daily."

A third stated:

> Spiritually, I think it has given me more time to think about what I really appreciate about life, do more reading that I want to do and that sort of thing. I think when you are younger you don't really have the time and you are not thinking about bettering yourself in those areas.

Participants often referred to their new-found joy in reading and reflecting, something they had little time for in the past. "More time for God and to reflect on where God fits into my life," as one put it. Another related "doing

more reading."

Strength

Some participants derived strength from their faith during this period in their lives. One relayed a "prime example of God giving me strength when I needed it, and another time when He gave me health when I needed it." Another stated it this way; "It just gives you strength to be around people that have the same beliefs that you do." Another in speaking about difficulties in her job says "Recognizing that I can't do it unless I take Jesus with me. This year especially, I could not be making it through the days without Him."

Growth

Spiritual growth was another characteristic of this stage in life. "From the age of 45 to my present age, I would say has been a very growing time for me, mainly because ____[husband] and I have started going to church and we are learning not only about God but more about ourselves and how we can be better people and to accept things more for what they are." and "Spiritually I think I'm just becoming even stronger in my faith." Another declared simply

"I think my faith is very strong." Another when describing her children's departure from home said:

> I guess I have always had a fairly strong faith and so I think the growth was more gradual than a big jump, other than having more time to devote to things . . . Spiritually I guess my faith would have probably strengthened some at that time.

One woman said her faith changes every day, "as you learn and realize how God protects. . . . I believe as you get older, your faith becomes much stronger." It is interesting that she credits that growth to the "experiences of those teen years. We realize we can't do it on our own and we learn to leave things alone." When answering question #4 about the differences in today's faith and the faith she had while her children were still home, one participant said "I'm not sure that there is a difference in the faith other than it is stronger every day." Another, in explaining her spiritual growth said "It [faith] always was strong but I think when there is just you, you spend more time with your faith - reading your Bible and so on and it gets a chance to grow."

Conscious/Unconscious Faith

"Every day I am just thankful for every day and I know that I never go anywhere without my Lord with me." These words spoken by one of the participants indicates someone who is very conscious of her faith. It was intriguing to the researcher, that many of these women spoke of a period in their lives when faith was unconscious or they were not aware of it. One who had been taught at home and church as a child, spoke of a time when she set that aside.

> After my confirmation, when I was 18 or 19, I scrapped it. It was impossible! So that's meant a lot of sorting but the believing never left me. It was a very difficult time, and I had a lot of faith but at that time, was not going to church, but because of these memories, very strong within me, that faith was still there.

Another stated:

> Faith played a large part. I don't think that I could have done it without, although I may not have been super conscious of it at the time. I may not have been really aware how big a role it played. It did because just day to day, I could not have gotten through had I

not had a faith.

Another explained:

> I guess I never really thought about faith or realized at that time, like I do now, that God was always with me . . . So I guess I can't really say that I had a lot of faith, outward anyway, maybe inner, that I was not aware of.

She later referred to a growth in faith as "A different kind of growing but maybe more aware of it . . . You maybe don't think of it as growing, but now it is more conscious and you are thinking more . . ."

Prayer

Prayer played a big role in the lives of these participants. Some spoke of praying less when children were small but almost all referred to the use of prayer during their children's teenage years. "I guess I didn't pray as much for them when they were home and kids. I was pretty busy and well, things got put on the back burner." Later describing her children's leaving:

> I guess for the most part, I didn't worry a whole lot about them because I was praying about them and I

continue to pray for them, that they come to a personal relationship with Christ more than anything else."

Another participant, when asked what has helped her grow in her faith answered:

> Prayer, I would say, just steady prayer . . . asking for guidance, forgiveness . . . Back then though, our prayers were just when we felt like we really needed help, when we were down. Now we pray not only for guidance but for other people more than we do for ourselves . . . I don't think I have had one yet that has not been answered.

Another stated "Through that time of adjusting, I know that prayer helped and just remembering certain passages."

When answering question #4 regarding how today's faith differs from the faith she had before the children left, one participant said "I think at that time I relied more on myself and ___ [husband] for things other than God really. And now, I'm not that anxious about things. I know that God does answer prayer."

Experiences from the Past

Someone has said that experience is the best teacher.

The seven women in this study would agree. There was much reference to the experiences of the past and how those assisted them in the present. As one of the participants stated:

> You can look back on it and know that He was there rather than the apprehension of looking forward and not knowing what the future will bring. We still don't know, but we have experienced God's leading in the past.

Another stated:

> When they were home, your whole life centres around them. When they are gone, your faith gets stronger because you know it carried you through the tough times in marriage and with your family life."

Another participant said:

> We learn that God is faithful in protecting them. Sometimes He has to stand us on our heads to make us realize. Because we've had the experiences of those teen years, we realize we can't do it on our own and we learn to leave things alone. I've learned to leave things in God's hands.

One participant said, "At the same time we don't really

worry because we know that God is looking after them, but then I guess that is the answer. God is looking after them." Another put it this way:

> When I look back on it now . . . I can't believe that I lived through it. If I had to do it today, I probably couldn't . . . But if I did have to go through it again, I know that God would be there and give me the strength."

Willingness to Let Go and Let God

These women were not shy in expressing the difficulty of letting their child go. It was obvious, sometimes by tears, that there was suffering involved with children leaving home. In spite of that, the researcher was struck with their willingness to let them go. One of the participants described it as follows:

> It [faith] gave me the ability to let go. To know that I was never in control but now I've done what I can to teach those kids the values and faith they need, and when you see them making some choices that you think are not so good . . . But I say, 'it's in your hands now God and I have done what I can' and that gives me a

sense of peace. I do the best I can but rely on God's help.

One woman said that her faith really helped her in the transition of children leaving home. When asked how it helped she replied "well, I guess if I would not have had that to fall back on, it would have been a lot harder . . . just that God is with them and they are happy and that kind of gives you hope." Another when asked if she had learned to leave things in God's hands replied, "Yes, and if I was smarter, I'd do it a lot more. I know that the Lord is going to look after them."

Passing on the Faith

There was concern on the part of the participants, that this faith which they cherish, be passed on to their children and grandchildren. One participant said regarding her son:

> He is not closed minded about going to church but he is not comfortable with it yet. I think it is more because of what his friends might think or whatever. Whatever it is, I honestly believe that when the right time is appropriate, that he will be guided.

Another related:

> I certainly have been relying on my faith, wanting to give her [daughter] that faith so that she can work through what she has to . . . I am wanting to give this to her so that she has that base to stand on . . . I want to teach her the basics of faith. I want her to grow into that same kind of faith that she can trust and accept everything.

One participant stated simply "they are both Christians and that really helps." Another expressed her concern by saying "I know they all left home with a good grounding in Christian faith but they haven't really had to test it out yet."

Chapter V

Discussion

Goddard (1995) proposed a "philosophical definition of spirituality as integrative energy" (p. 808). The participants in this study have defined for this research project what constitutes this "integrative energy". They have in fact given the researcher a number of ways that they integrate their faith into their transition of children leaving home.

The Model

The conditions that generated the participant's growth and energy are variable. They are illustrated in the model as the "roots" that ground faith and provide the sustenance for it to grow. The trigger event that seems responsible for this mid-life spiritual growth is the event of children leaving home. The time that the women now had available to them was a prime factor in the growth and integration that took place. It was the one factor that was referred to by all the women and was very well supported in the literature.

Once growth was triggered and nurtured in this way,

faith grew and was integrated into the experience of the empty nest. This growth is illustrated in the model as branches on the tree. The outgrowth of this "integrative energy" in the lives of the women is illustrated as the fruits or leaves of the tree (Model, p. 64). Figure 1 presents a diagrammatic representation of the study findings.

Physical Domain

The women described how this time of transition has given them more awareness of their bodies, sometimes because of illnesses or the limitations their bodies now dictate, and sometimes because of the changes associated with menopause and aging. Body awareness has received some attention in the literature, especially in Gail Sheehy's (1992, 1995) books. Mid-life seems to be the time, according to Sheehy that we become much more aware of our bodies, often noting the fact that we are growing older.

There were several studies done in the early 1990's on fitness, physical activity and well-being in mid-life (Gillis & Perry, 1991; Dennerstein, Smith & Morse, 1994; Woods & Mitchell, 1996). Fitness programs have a beneficial

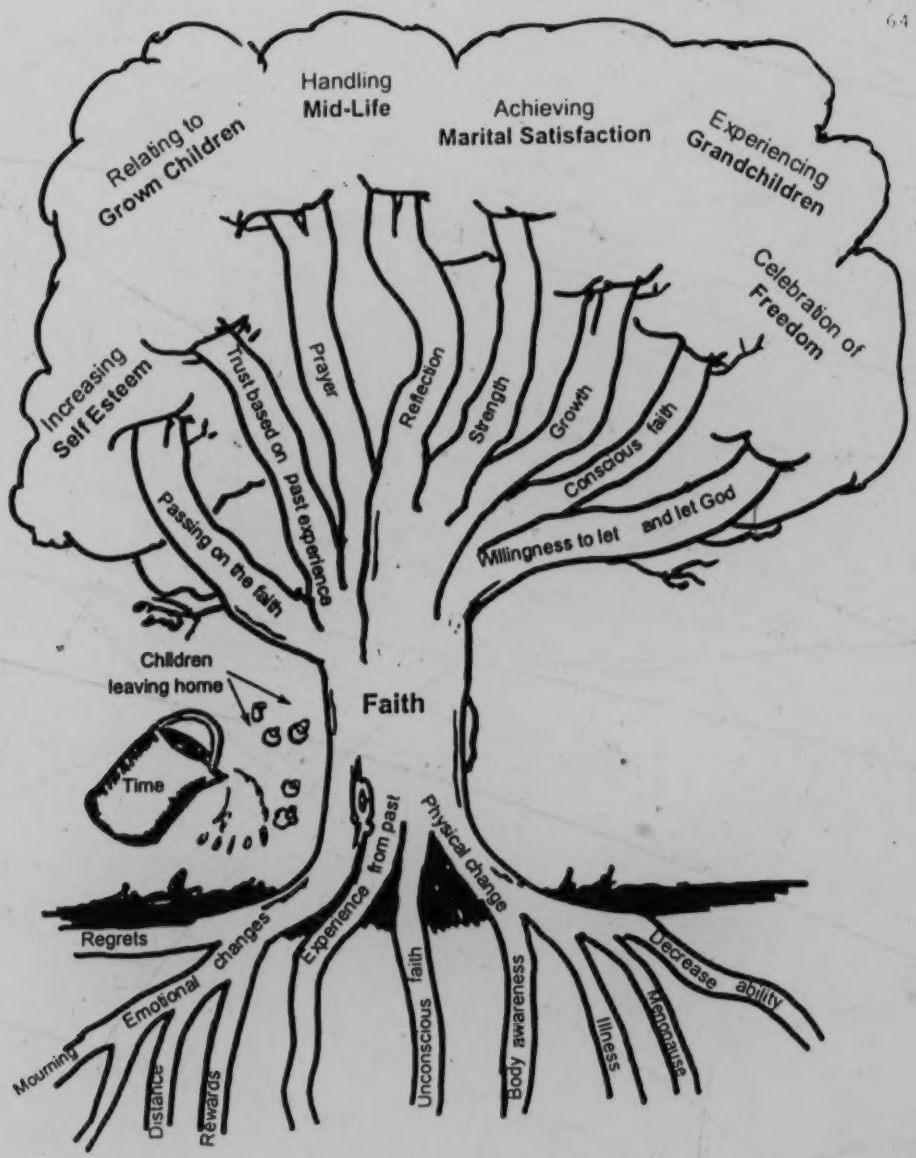

Figure 1. Faith integration into empty nest stage.

effect on well-being according to these studies. Mid-life women are very open to these due to their increased body-awareness.

Physical concerns were not referred to very often. These are active women and this finding would be expected given Thomas's 1988 study regarding the negative relationship found between talent perception and total symptoms of menopause. Six of the seven women in this study were employed and all were using their talents in church and other volunteer activities.

In the past, literature often viewed menopause negatively. This has changed in recent years. Dennerstein, Smith and Morse (1994) assessed women and concluded that menopause did not significantly affect well-being. It is interesting to the researcher, that menopause was not significant enough in the lives of most of the women to mention it in answering the question which asked specifically about physical and emotional factors. Pender's (1987) Health Promotion Model postulates that people's perceptions of themselves and their health and modifying factors play an influential role in determining their lifestyle activities.

Emotional Domain

The women in this study all recognized this time in their lives as a time of great change. They described the regrets and rewards involved as they looked back on their active parenting years. These rewards are in agreement with what White and Edwards (1990) learned in their study, that life satisfaction and marital satisfaction improved after the transition of empty nest had occurred. Krystal and Chiriboga (1979) discovered that "most women exulted in the fact that they had some free time in which to explore themselves, take classes and workshops and, often for the first time - enter the job market" (p. 217).

They admitted to a dislike of distance between their grown children and them. White and Edwards (1990) reported that marital and life satisfaction improved for both men and women, after the nest became empty, but life satisfaction had it's most significant improvement only if there was frequent contact with their children. The findings in this study complements theirs. Krystal and Chiriboga's (1979) study also supports the positive aspects or rewards of the empty nest. The majority of the women in their study stated that they were feeling better than ever and were taking care

of themselves for once and felt much freer and in charge of their own time. (p. 217)

The women in this study recognized the period of mourning when the empty nest first occurred. Snow (1990) alluded to reasons for mourning in mid-life--the dreams we had for our children now must meet with the reality that though they are not openly rebellious, may not quite fit the dream we had for them. Spence and Lonner (1972) as cited in Barber (1989) observed:

> Some mothers, although looking forward to the departure of their children from the home, expressed great hope but less confidence in their children's ability to handle the departure well. This lack of confidence created uncertainty in the minds of some mothers" (p. 27). While the early literature (Deutscher, 1959; Rogers, 1973; Krystal & Chiriboga, 1978) would support the idea that there are gender differences in the transition to the empty nest, more recent articles (Bell & Eisenberg, 1985; DeVries, 1990) would refute this. Their studies showed very little difference but if any, fathers handled this transition more negatively than their wives.

Oliver's (1988) warning that the transition from active

mothering . . . such as occurs at the empty nest stage is fraught with maladaptive potential, was not borne out in this study. Nor was this stage considered negative by these participants, as early literature had shown. Though there was some nostalgia and comments such as "I still miss him", I did not sense a need in any of these women for Oliver's rational emotive therapy.

Spiritual Domain

All the women recognized this time as a time of spiritual growth. They have described how this time of transition has given them more time for reflection and meditation. Dale (1970) encouraged women in mid-life to enjoy the extra time they now have and tc use it for their own growth in faith. She described mid-life as the period of greatest spiritual growth in a woman's lifetime. The women in this study recognized this gift of time and in turn, how the use of time resulted in growth and more strength for their daily adjustments and tasks.

Burkhard's (1994) research was summed up in the statement, "Spirituality was related to inner knowing and source of strength" (p. 12). Colston (1994) wrote about the

benefits of faith and religion to the social transitions of aging. He found that faith was a critical element in one's personal adaptation to aging" (p.75). Goddard (1995) described spirituality as "a resource which an individual can draw upon in periods of personal crisis to maintain or restore a sense of stability in life" (p. 813). The testimony of participants in this study indicates that they experienced this spiritual "energy" as a source of strength at the empty nest stage of their lives.

Dobbie (1991) claimed that "trigger events" gave impetus to women's spiritual development and that one of these events were children leaving home. The event could have these repercussions in part because of the free time now available for prayer and meditation.

They have also described a growth process that is slow and gradual but very present. There was no great "metamorphosis" in faith in any of the women in this study, such as Dale (1970), describes. Rather, growth in faith was described as a gradual process, resulting from an improved prayer life and time spent with God in prayer and meditation.

Perhaps, what the women are saying is what McClelland

(1997) stated, "As a result of the mid-life transition we gain a unique ability to worship God with our whole selves" (p.12). Time is likely a prime factor in that unique ability. All of the women in Krystal and Chiriboga's (1979) study expressed a great interest in self-knowledge and self-development.

Dale (1970) related spiritual growth to the midlife period. She claimed that mid-life is the time of most potential growth in the faith. Several writers have addressed the differences in spiritual growth between men and women. Burkhardt (1994) stated that women's spirituality emphasis changing and growing. One woman in Burkhardt's study said, "I've found things in my life that helped me to become that spiritual person I want to be. It's all about becoming and I figure I'll be becoming until I die" (p. 18).

Participants have recognized that their faith is more conscious now while it tended to be more unconscious in the past. These findings were not a surprise, having read Dobbie's (1991) study of ten mid-life women in the United church. She spoke in this study of "the evolving consciousness of God" (p. 827). McCole (1995) described midlife as an emerging of the unconscious and encouraged

women in mid-life to recognize who is walking with them (likening mid-life to an Emmaus road experience). Dale (1970) also referred to this time of becoming consciousness in mid-life as we "become aware of the cross's relevance to human experience" (p.62).

These responses appear to fit with Willits and Crider's study (1988) in which attitude items such as knowing there is a God and believing that God controls everything enhance overall well-being. Almost all of the participants had religious training as children as well and one should note the study's (Willits & Crider, 1988) suggestion that the effect of early religious socialization on adult well-being is a positive one.

Prayer has been an instrument of growth, a means to help them cope with the many changes of this period as well as an important means for passing on their faith to the next generations. Again we can recognize some of the attitudes spoken of by Willits and Crider (1988). The knowledge that there is a God and that He knows our every thought and movement is behind the prayer beliefs described above. Prayer is one of the elements of spirituality addressed by Ellerhorst-Ryan (1988), and is often used by those in the

church today as a measure of faith, for example, someone who prays a lot is considered to have a stronger faith than someone who does not. Having a nurse pray with a patient was also one of the needs cited by patients toward their nurses in Ellerhorst-Ryan's study.

Colston (1994) made reference to the various stages of life coined by Eric Erickson (Erickson, Erickson, & Kivnick, 1986). A stage that Erickson added in his later years was referred to as "Wisdom" which he claims is the fruit of the struggle between integrity and defeat. The wisdom of this stage comes from "surviving the uncertainty of life events, understanding their complexity and developing an applied knowledge of the past which can be passed down from generation to generation" (p. 76).

They described this time of transiti ר as a time of rewards and in one instance, "the best time of her life" DeVries'(1990) study used a marital satisfaction index which showed higher ratings in what he called the "post-parental period." Small's (1991) study showing greater personal fulfilment after children leave was also born out in this study especially by the longer-time empty nesters. There was no evidence among these women of the state of loss of

meaning or confusion that Nolan (1986) writes about.

The subject's experiences with faith in the past have been the major factor in their ability to integrate their faith into this transition. They described worrying about their children, especially as they became teenagers and left the nest but having now realized that worry was a futile waste of energy. In some cases, experience with the eldest leaving home has provided them with enough evidence of God's care and keeping, that worry about subsequent children decreased. Conversely, experiences of life may not serve to teach us about faith at mid-life. Snow (1990) wrote about the "failure at midlife" (p. 11) of a persons' faith, which he attributes to:

> People using their religion as a pious overlay. They go to church for a kind of social support. But they do not see that who God is and how God acts in the world and how humans respond to this God are of any help in their lives (p. 11).

Dudley and Cruise's (1990) study titled "Measuring Religious Maturity: A Proposed Scale" had several items which related to life's experiences and their effect on a person's religious maturity. Prayer and relying on God were

important elements. Colston (1994) also wrote about the value of past life experiences in older people. Faith, he stated "becomes the belief that one can and will successfully survive the social transitions of life. In faith one can find purpose for living and a means of coping with life events" (p. 77).

There is a willingness to "let go and let God" recognizable in these mid-life women, which gives them an added sense of peace, tranquillity and strength. This perhaps enforces Burkhardt's (1994) study which revealed women's spirituality as a major source of strength. It seems to support the findings of White and Edwards (1990) that life after the "empty nest" is active and meaningful to women and men alike.

These statements correspond with Willits and Crider (1988). The statements of attitudes associated with feelings of enhanced overall well-being, which apply to the above women are, 1) believing that God knows our every thought and movement and 2) believing that God controls everything that happens. The statements above are indicative of these attitudes.

Faith integration into the mid-life transition of

children leaving home does happen as evidenced by the lives and words of the participants in this study.

Future Research

This study was limited to the Lutheran denomination since this is the tradition in which the researcher works as a parish nurse. It would be interesting and useful to do a study in other faith traditions. The researcher would be particularly interested in comparing integration of faith in the transition to the empty nest in this group with another denomination, especially the concept of conscious/ unconscious faith. This study explored faith based on Lutheran doctrines but may be expressed in other ways by women from other denominations. Lutheran doctrines place emphasis on salvation by grace alone and would accept the times of "unconscious faith" described by some participants, as being part of a walk of faith. Other more fundamentalist denominations may see this period of unconscious faith as a sign of "backsliding" or need for conversion. Though the time of return to "conscious faith" would be important and a reason to rejoice among Lutherans, it would not necessarily indicate a conversion from a time of "no faith" to a "saving

faith" (Hordern, 1975).

The mid-life stage, as described in this study appears to be a very spiritual time in the life of women. Further research is warranted into spiritual growth in mid-life women as well as other age groups. There is not an abundance of literature on the subject of spiritual growth, especially in women. Further research into various aspects of this growth would be helpful to all who seek to understand this phenomena.

It would also be useful to do a similar study in women without faith to explore the similarities and differences with women of faith. The women in this study listed husband, children, work and God as giving meaning to this stage in life. Would non-faith women list only the first three factors or would they have something in the place of importance attributed to God by these women.

As a parish nurse over this past year, I have become aware of other transitions that older women often face. Many face the transition of living with an ailing husband and/or the adjustment of placing him in a care facility, and eventually, must adjust to widowhood. How women's faith is integrated into these transitions would be of interest to

parish nurses and nurses in general, especially those who work in long-term care settings.

More recent literature suggests a relationship between healing and spirituality (Hood, 1995). Spiritual health has been shown through research, to be beneficial to overall health and healing. Hood attests to the fact that "more research is warranted to test the efficacy of remedies that use spiritual energy, such as therapeutic touch, prayer and meditation" (p. 89).

Most nursing models and theories do not specifically address spirituality according to Martsolf and Mickley (1998). Further research could facilitate the formulation of nursing models that do address spirituality. Hood (1995) states "To establish the efficacy of conscientiously providing nursing care based on spiritual principles, theory related to spirituality in the context of nursing needs to be formalized and tested" (p. 88). It has not been the purpose of this study to develop theory but the findings could be useful in such an endeavour in the future.

Ross (1994) describes the lack of guidelines for the practice of spiritual care as follows:

Lack of a generally agreed definition of 'spiritual',

lack of literature specifically on spiritual care, apparent lack of attention to spiritual issues in nurses education programmes, lack of research and a lack of a conceptual framework for spiritual care in nursing.

Further research is needed to fill these gaps in nursing education and nursing knowledge.

Implications for Nursing Practice

The study would be helpful for parish nurses and ministers in all denominations to have a better understanding about the growth of faith in mid-life. Too often church education programs are directed to children and young people. The church should note the experiences of growth in faith described by mid-life women and seize the opportunity to provide programs which would enhance growth in faith in this age group.

The parish nurse has a unique role in dealing with spiritual needs. As the parish nurse counsels and visits with mid-life and older women, the information gained in this study will be of great value in communicating and promoting spiritual growth. These women could also be resources to younger women in sharing their experiences in the faith and the insights they have gained. The findings in this study were discussed with three of the participants. One of the participants expressed the opinion that mid-life transitions would be much more difficult without her faith. She spoke of friends who did not have faith, who were having a very difficult time adjusting to menopause and the empty nest. The parish nurse and other women of faith have an

opportunity to share their faith with such women and to assist them in drawing on that faith in times of transition.

Working with women of all ages in hospital or community agencies, it would be beneficial for nurses to understand the spirituality which is unique to mid-life women. Whereas nurses attempt to do holistic nursing, the research done by Ellerhorst-Ryan (1988) does not applaud nurses for efforts in spiritual care. Perhaps a better understanding of spirituality in women would benefit this cause and improve nursing's effectiveness in addressing the spiritual dimension of care. Ross (1994) stated "it would seem that spiritual care should be part of the nurse's role" (p. 441). Nolan and Crawford (1997) quote the Prince of Wales when he spoke about the "irony of asking patients on admission to hospital to which religion they belong and then ignoring all that their religion might mean to them in terms of how they understand and cope with illness"(p. 291).

Becoming more aware and knowledgeable about women's spirituality would aid nurses in the assessment of spiritual needs, and formulation of nursing diagnoses in the spiritual realm. While "spiritual distress" is included in NANDA's (Gordon, 1993) list of diagnoses, most nurses lack the

knowledge to plan or implement related to solving this problem. Continuing education is needed to help nurses become more confident in planning, implementation and evaluation of spiritual care.

Nursing education needs to be more involved in teaching spiritual assessment and assisting students to become more aware of spiritual needs and strengths. Ross (1994) stated:

> Both British and international guidelines for nurse education indicate that spiritual care should be taught to nurses. For instance, in preparation for Project 2000 (UKCC, 1986), it has been recommended that nurse education should 'provide opportunities to enable the student to . . . acquire the competencies required to: identify spiritual needs of the patient or client, devise a plan of care, contribute to its implementation and evaluation by demonstrating an appreciation and practice of principles of a problem solving approach' (p. 441).

Nurses need to be familiar with spiritual well-being scales and should know how to conduct a spiritual assessment. They need to learn that there is much variation in spiritual well-being and that there are developmental

stages in spiritual life, just as there is in physical and psychological growth and development. This study will shed light on the spiritual development of mid-life women, and could provide ideas for questions to assess spiritual needs and strengths of mid-life women.

One of the roles of nursing is that of patient advocate. To be able to advocate for their mid-life female patients in the spiritual realm, nurses need to understand their spiritual needs and be prepared to tend to those needs as well as referring to other spiritual caregivers appropriately. This requires a certain comfort level on the nurse's part which can only be achieved through study and understanding of women's spirituality. Continuing education in this area is necessary.

The implications for nursing are numerous. If spiritual care was properly taught to nursing students and understood by nurses in general, the possibilities of helping to relieve the spiritual distress we see in our clients are enormous. It is the hope of the researcher that this study would assist in this education and understanding.

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Appendix A: Sample advertisement for church paper

As a follow-up to her parish nursing experience in this congregation, and as part of the Master of Nursing program at the University of Alberta, Rose-Aline Begalke will be conducting a research project over the next several months. Volunteers are required for this research. If you are female, married, have children who have left home, and are between 45 and 60 years of age, please talk to Rose-Aline (ph. 539-9956 (H), 539-2758 (W) or 532-4978 (church, Tues. a.m.) about participating, or leave your name and phone number with the church secretary. Time commitment would be 2-3 hours over the next three months for two interviews which would be tape recorded, and to complete a questionnaire. Interview times and places can be arranged at your convenience.

Appendix B: Questionnaire for Demographic Data

Please complete the following: If, for any reason, you do not want to answer a question please leave it blank.

1. Age at last birthday:_____

2. Number of years married:_____

3. Husbands age at last birthday:_____

4. Employment Status_____

5. Number and ages of children who have left home:_____

_____

_____

_____

6. Are any of your children dependent on you for financial support?_____

7. Are the children who have left home - Far away?_____

or Nearby enough to visit frequently?_____

8. How easily can you visit children and grandchildren

_____

9. Is there any other family, health or other information that you would like to include?

_____

_____

Appendix C: Interview Guide

Questions: If you do not wish to answer a question, please feel free to say so.

1. Tell me what it has been like to be in your middle years, physically, emotionally, spiritually. (from about age 45 and on).

2. Tell me about what it was like when your children began leaving home. Let's begin with the first child.

3. Tell me how your faith fit into your adjustment.

4. Tell me how today's faith differs from before the children left home (if it differs)?

5. Tell me something about what gave you meaning or purpose in life before your children began leaving home and what gives meaning to your life now?

6. Is there anything else you would like to tell me about this period in your life?

Appendix D: Consent to Act as a Subject in a Research Project

CONSENT

Part 1:

Title of Project : How do mid life women integrate their faith into the transition of children leaving home?

Principal Investigator(s): Rose-Aline Begalke, M.N. Candidate, Ph.(403) 539-2758 (W) or 539-9956 (H)

Co-Investigator(s): Joanne Olson, Associate Professor, Faculty of Nursing, University of Alberta, Edmonton, AB. Ph. (403) 492 -6250

Part 2 (to be completed by the research subject):

Do you understand that you have been asked to be in a research study?
Yes No

Have you read and received a copy of the attached Information Sheet?
Yes No

Do you understand the benefits and risks involved in taking part in this research study? Yes No

Have you had an opportunity to ask questions and discuss this study?
Yes No

Do you understand that you are free to refuse to participate or withdraw from the study at any time? You do not have to give a reason and it will not affect your relationship with the parish nurse.
Yes No

Has the issue of confidentiality been explained to you?
Yes No

This study was explained to me by: _____

I agree to take part in this study.

_____ _____ _____

Signature of Research Participant Date Witness

_____ _____

Printed Name Printed Name

I believe that the person signing this form understands what is involved in the study and voluntarily agrees to participate.

Appendix E: Information Sheet

How do mid-life women integrate their faith into the transition of children leaving home?

Investigator: Rose-Aline Begalke R.N. M.N.(Candidate), Instructor, Nursing Education Department, Grande Prairie Regional College, Parish nurse, Trinity Lutheran Church, Grande Prairie, Ab. Ph. 539-9956
Supervisor: Dr. Joanne Olson R.N. PhD. Associate Professor, Faculty of Nursing, University of Alberta, Ph. (403) 492- 6250.

This study is a research study for a graduate thesis and will explore the part faith plays in the lives of mid-life women when their children leave home. Interest in this study developed during a parish nurse practicum and from the investigators personal experience. Women who take part in this study will be asked to fill out a questionnaire, and then be interviewed by the investigator. The interview will last from one to two hours. It will be tape recorded. The investigator may also take notes during the interview. A second shorter interview may be needed later to clarify issues which may have arisen and ask additional questions if necessary.

Participating in this study will give you a chance to share your story. There may be no direct benefits to you but the study may assist parish nurses to assist others,

experiencing this transition. There are no known risks to participating in this study but if you should find the telling of your story upsetting in any way, appropriate resources in the community could be accessed. Ms. Lucy Buller MSc., Research Officer for the Mistahia Health Authority may be contacted with any concerns you may have (538-5316).

Participant's names will not be used when study results are reported. Taped interviews will be identified by code and all study information will be kept in a locked cabinet and separate from the code list. Consent forms and study information will be kept for seven years, after which they are destroyed. Participants in this study may drop out of the study at any time. If data from this study is to be used in future studies, further ethics approval would be sought.

Appendix F: Analysis by Question

Interparticipant Analysis

The analysis was done by constant comparison of the answers that each participant provided to each question. The most obvious difference in the findings in this analysis was the marked variety in length and depth of responses. One question file would contain several pages from one participant and a paragraph from another, whereas a subsequent question might produce opposite results, even though the total response length from each participant was nearly equal. Obviously, the question that was of most importance to one participant was not the prime factor for another. A summary of those findings follows:

Question 1: Tell me what it has been like to be in your middle years, physically, emotionally and spiritually.

The first question was an open-ended question designed to encourage women to tell their story. There were some answers which gave a general overview of this period in their lives, such as "It's probably one of the better times in my life." Though the question specifically asked for physical, emotional and spiritual aspects, data was minimal

on the physical aspect. It was referred to only in relation to menopausal symptoms that were troubling or if there was a possible chronic condition. "You don't know if it is going to get better or if you'll be like this for the rest of your life." "Realizing you are not invincible and an awareness of permanent effects" was also mentioned. Menopausal symptoms were only mentioned once. The average age of the sample (53) could be a contributing factor to their lack of concern about menopause. Most of these women were employed full time, all were active in their church and several had involvement with their grandchildren.

Question 2: Tell me about what it was like when your children began leaving home.

This question led directly into the topic of the empty nest. There was almost an eagerness to answer this question and little prompting was required by the researcher. For some it was emotional, others were nostalgic, with comments like "where did the time go?" The stories told about children leaving home were as varied as the children. Even within the same family, one teenager's leaving home did not produce the same memories, emotions or nostalgia as did the departure of his sibling. The memories were still very fresh

even though the time since the nest became empty varied from two to fifteen years.

Question 3: Tell me how your faith fit into your adjustment.

This question surprisingly brought almost matter-of-fact answers. Faith had always been a part of most of these women's lives so "relying on it" and "getting strength from it" was very natural. The confidence that "God would take care of them" was characteristic and prayer was very important. The statement "believing in God helps," sums up the responses to this question.

Question 4: Tell me how today's faith differs from before the children left home (if it differs).

Many referred to "growing" in faith during this period, while others felt they had always had faith but they became more aware or conscious of it in mid-life. They spoke of "more trusting and less expectations" and "relying on faith". The concept of "change" in their faith was common but "before and after" the children left home was not always associated with the change, except that in the "before" time

frame, several mentioned the lack of time for prayer and meditation and stated more of their growth had occurred "after" because of that.

*** Dobbie (1991) claimed that "trigger events" gave impetus to women's spiritual development and that one of these events were children leaving home. The event could have these repercussions because of the free time now available for prayer and meditation. There was no great "metamorphosis" in faith in any of the women in this study, such as Dale, (1970) describes. Rather, growth in faith was described as a gradual process.

Question 5: Tell me something about what gave you meaning and purpose in life before the children began leaving home and what gives meaning to your life now.

Surprisingly, meaning before and after children left, was not that different. "Kids, work, home and church" were on most lists. Meaning gained from children remained whether the children were in the nest or out of it. After the children left, grandchildren were often added to that list. There was never mention of more or less meaning in life, before and after children left. Husbands were on the list

more often, after children had left. One commented "My husband is more important now - we spend a lot of time together, doing things we like to do."

Question 6: Is there anything else you would like to tell me about this period in your life?

This question was intended to give the participants an opportunity to add anything missed or thought of later. It seemed to bring out more freedom to digress into other topics not previously mentioned. Comments were volunteered such as "Grandkids are better than kids", it was a "relief to see the children go" and "now I am getting back my own life". An ongoing resolve to quit smoking surfaced as well and further emphasis on the importance of God in their lives.

Appendix G:

University of Alberta
Edmonton
Canada T6G 2G4

Faculty of Rehabilitation Medicine
Rehabilitation Research Centre
3-48 Corbett Hall
Director (403) 492-7856 Telephone (403) 492-2903
Fax (403) 492-1626

UNIVERSITY OF ALBERTA HEALTH SCIENCES FACULTIES, CAPITAL HEALTH AUTHORITY, AND CARITAS HEALTH GROUP

HEALTH RESEARCH ETHICS APPROVAL

Date: January 1998

Name(s) of Principal Investigator(s): Rose-Aline Begalke

Organization(s): University of Alberta

Department: Graduate Studies, Faculty of Nursing

Project Title: How do mid-life women integrate their faith into the transition of children leaving home?

The Health Research Ethics Board has reviewed the protocol for this project and found it to be acceptable within the limitations of human experimentation. The HREB has also reviewed and approved the patient information material and consent form.

The approval for the study as presented is valid for one year. It may be extended following completion of the yearly report form. Any proposed changes to the study must be submitted to the Health Research Ethics Board for approval.

Sharon Warren

Dr. Sharon Warren
Chair of the Health Research Ethics Board (B: Health Research)

File number: B-050198-NSG